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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses client service issues to be considered when transitioning to a virtual library situation. Themes related to the transitional nature of society in the knowledge era are presented, including: paradox and a contradictory nature; blurring of boundaries; networks, systems, and holistic thinking; process/not product, becoming/not being, experience/not thing; and change is costly. The following corporate trends in today's society are examined from a library point of view: broadening the range of products and services; creation of new value propositions; virtualization of organizations; ways in which companies are getting closer to their customers; addition of demergers to traditional mergers and acquisitions; formation of strategic alliances; growth of outsourcing; expanding globalization; rapid entry of newcomers into old markets; and customization. Other topics covered include investigating client behavior, client-centered design, client relationship management, and strategic planning for the virtual library. The paper concludes with 12 strategies for successful transition of libraries to electronic mode: educate, train, and promote staff, clients, and partners; review current distribution channels; understand what clients expect from the World Wide Web; re-evaluate the nature of libraries services; adopt client-centered service design; give new roles to staff; extend current business to the outside; develop a Web-centric marketing strategy; instill electronic management style; develop a good technical infrastructure; provide a secure, well-controlled system; and provide adequate resources. (MES)

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VIRTUAL LIBRARIES: SERVICE REALITIES

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A Society in Transition

Today I would like to discuss some of the client service issues to be considered when transiting to a virtual library situation. But before I discuss client service in an electronic environment, I would first like to take a brief look at our world: the world in which our institutions exist; the world in which we and our users will continue to operate.

Michael J. Mazarr, in his book, *Global Trends 2005*, focuses upon the transitional nature of society in the knowledge era and identifies several themes which are relevant to libraries:

- paradox and a contradictory nature
- a blurring of boundaries
- networks, systems and holistic thinking
- process, not product; becoming, not being; experience, not thing
- change is costly

The first is paradox, which he identifies as the single overriding aspect of the social transformation under way today. He goes on to say that the knowledge era is a time of inconsistency and ambiguity; that there is decentralization within globalism; fragmentation within mass culture; expanded individualism within stronger community, and absolutism within relativism. Society's complex transitional state makes it difficult to identify uncomplicated trends; and there is a central paradox for libraries who are finding that the increased requirement of our customers for simplicity of interaction with our organization creates greater complexity for us as managers.

The second aspect is a blurring of boundaries; between disciplines, industries, and social enterprises. Things we were accustomed to seeing as highly distinct endeavours, such as acquisitions and cataloguing, or even circulation and reference services, become, if not one and the same, at least much more alike than they have been. Reengineering and reorganizing have become commonplace in libraries that hadn't seen major conceptional organizational changes in decades. The inter-industrial phenomenon is causing businesses not to think about what industry they are in, but what core competencies they have to offer and what industries they could enter. The other major factor of importance is that boundaries between disciplines are less important than the threads that connect them.

The third theme described is that of networks, systems, and holistic thinking. "Dominant functions and processes in the information age are increasingly organized around networks." [Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*] Nowhere are networks more significant than when increasingly virtual corporations come together in temporary partnerships and alliances. So we have come from interdisciplinary blurring of boundaries to networked interdependency. The implication here is that processes produced by a networked era cannot be understood as individual activities or singular events but must be thought of as systems, interactive sets of enterprises that move forward in a coevolutionary pattern with one another.

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The fourth theme Mazarr discusses is process not product; becoming not being; experience not thing. The knowledge era is a time dominated by ideas and concepts, and as such, reduces emphasis on

tangible things and increases the emphasis on abstraction. The dominance of process and experience manifests in a number of ways. Services, for example, are a form of process rather than a specific product. Education has become a lifelong process rather than a one-time event. The responsibilities of academic libraries to institutional alumni or continuing education participants need to be redefined, as these activities become increasingly established in our society. Moreover, there is the concept that the overall quality of a library can often be deduced from the quality of its processes. A concept that gives rise to program performance evaluation, operational performance targets, and benchmarking best practice. As well, in an era of rapid change, there is more emphasis on the idea of becoming: constantly improving and advancing and evolving, but never actually arriving. To use Mazarr's words, "…we must adjust our mind-sets for an era of constant change and inexorable innovation."

Change, however, is costly. I frequently imagine our Vice-Chancellor and the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Planning and Resources, joined in common prayer, "Dear Lord, if I give the Library a million dollar system, will they be able to reduce staff?" Along with, "Dear Lord, if I encourage collaboration, will they be able to reduce staff?" We are in the midst of a major change in the way we do our business, and the transforming information world is considerably disruptive for libraries. It causes social stress and psychological strain in addition to the need for increasingly costly infrastructure.

To these trends I would add, a diminishing sense of place for many transactions. As we become increasingly remote from our clients, many of them will have no 'real' perception of the library as a physical space, nor have library staff an understanding of the clients' spatial reality. A tremendous amount of interaction with businesses today is done via call centres. It used to be the case that one might be connected with a call centre somewhere in one's home country. The current trend in Australia is to establish call centres in India, giving staff Australian names in the process. This gives a new dimension to the term off-site. Reconsidering processes in terms of physical locations offers new opportunities to libraries in terms of managing facilities and offers the possibility of purpose built service centres for clients who will never come into the library. The new service space, as opposed to place, will require technological and communications infrastructures plus a knowledge base and substantial staff training.

Peter Drucker describes what is happening in our society. "Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp *transformation*. We cross… a 'divide'. Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself – its world view; its basic values; its social and political structure; its arts; its key institutions. Fifty years later there is a new world. …We are currently living in such a transformation. (p. 1)

Corporate Trends in Today's Society

If Mazarr has identified trends of a society in transition, Robert Baldock in his book, *Destination Z: the History of the Future*, has listed the top ten shifts in corporate behaviour that provide the most telling pointers to the future:

- broadening of the range of products and services on offer
- creation of new value propositions
- virtualization of organizations
- the ways in which companies are getting closer to their customers
- the addition of demergers to traditional mergers and acquistions
- formation of strategic alliances
- the growth of outsourcing
- expanding globalization
- rapid entry of newcomers into old markets
- customization.

We can look at these issues from a library point of view.

Broadening of the range of services on offer is taking place daily in libraries: we have electronic reserve, direct document delivery, digitization of course materials, specialized pages in support of specific units, subject specific gateway services, computer based information literacy teaching programs, the list is

endless. The list is also electronic.

The creation of new value propositions is an interesting concept. I have been in several situations where library staff have been asked what business are you in? And the best response has been, the information business. But what does this mean when circulation staff believe they loan and shelve books rather than making information available, and reference staff are now acknowledging that citations are a form of information, an information address as it were, but clients want the real thing. And that is where full text databases with their capability for end to end services, from access to location to viewing to downloading or printing, are moving libraries into real information supply direct to the user regardless of location. To continue this train of thought, libraries need to look long and hard at what else they could do. For example, university libraries might form an alliance with university bookshops and piggyback off of each other's systems. Our library used to run a photocopying service. This evolved to include desktop printing, managing operations for other institutions, and retailing a range of replication supplies, many in direct and unwelcome competition with the University bookstore. The manager of that service kept creating new value propositions, ie new services, in order to ensure his continuing existence. An excellent example of value added services is Microsoft Officeworks. By bundling and integrating applications, Microsoft has created a powerful tool that is genuinely greater than the sum of its parts. The convenience is outstanding.

Virtualization of libraries is with us now, although the preferred option at this point is the hybrid library. Libraries actually have four choices:

- not to go electronic
- to offer electronic services as well as traditional services, initiating the changes on an ad hoc basis as opportunities arise
- to establish a group charged with the creation and maintenance of integrated electronic services
- to cease traditional operations and go for cyber operations.

Our library is currently in stage two of the process, and as part of this we have reached a point where it is necessary to take stock of various existing services and developments and those soon to be implemented, and to consider how they all fit together and what our future configuration will be. Not only are people concerned with the shape and direction of our electronic services, there is substantial pressure to define the relationship of electronic to traditional services and to ensure that we articulate the value of both. I believe that the traditional services in academic libraries will only last until there is a critical mass of digital material available, particularly with the advent of the electronic book. I also believe we must manage the transition more holistically than we have to date.

I would like to return to ways in which libraries get closer to their clients later, but there is a growing corporate strategy that I think is worth considering; and that is disintermediation or cutting out the middleman, as middlemen by definition act as a barrier between suppliers and their ultimate customers. Toyota motor company is actively exploring selling directly to the buyer rather than going through dealers. They have created an interactive web page with outstanding follow up. I know, because I picked my last car by searching on the Internet. Toyota sent me reams of information, approximately half an inch, on each model in which I expressed an interest. This was followed by personal phone calls offering to bring cars to me to test drive. I really appreciated that service, as I don't want to take days of my scarce time to go to car dealers to canvass the market. I would simply like to make one point here, to many information suppliers libraries are the intermediary between them and the information user. I do not know what the future will bring, but if I were a publisher or a vendor of academic or research information, I would be seriously wondering if I could reach a greater market by going direct. While libraries have grown beyond the belief that they have a monopoly on their clients, I am not confident we have acknowledged the very real possibility that our suppliers might simply go around us to our clients.

Mergers and acquistions and demergers today are different from the past in two ways: there are fewer contested takeovers as most take place between consenting partners, and much of the activity involves the breaking up of old style conglomerates. The logic of large conglomerates was that of ownership and rigid central control of all of their diverse bits based on the belief that the centre's general management skills could be applied with equal effectiveness to any business. I must admit this strikes a chord in

response to our own operations across four branches. Our library is centralist in nature and offer a relatively standardized service on the grounds that clients expect consistency in all locations, somewhat akin to fast food outlets operating all over the world. However, as time passes, I find myself in greater sympathy with staff in the branches who have, over the years, voiced the desire to tailor their services more closely to the needs of their users. Each branch already has its own distinct personality and way of doing things, and now may be the time to capitalize further on this. I believe our clients, who could also be termed our virtual communities, will increasingly expect products tailored to their needs. Libraries, when approaching service development, have normally catered for the mainstream, and electronic services, by their very nature, can promote standardization.

The formation of strategic alliances are radically different from the ways in which libraries traditionally operated. Our library is in partnership with Blackwell's for supply of shelf ready books, a significant joint venture worth millions of dollars. There are several important outcomes, both anticipated and unanticipated, which have arisen from this initiative:

- a reorganization of acquisition and cataloguing operations into one unit and a movement of some acquisitions tasks into client services
- shift of part of our staffing costs into our acquisitions budget, an important factor in an organisation where resource allocations are protected but staffing budgets are not
- the ability to accommodate substantial downsizing within the library
- significantly improved turnaround times from order date to shelf availability
- creation of a new role to manage the relationship
- possibly most significantly, a cultural change where the library sincerely sought to work in cooperative partnership with a supplier, including establishing interactive systems which would be termed extranets in e-commerce speak. Needless to say, this cannot be achieved without building a certain amount of mutual trust.

Outsourcing is a strategy we have not utilized so much as we might, although we have been using it for years in terms of hiring consultants to determine, analyse, and report on client needs, and increasingly we find ourselves outsourcing training for our staff, particularly in IT areas. On a larger scale, our university has recently outsourced management of its salary sacrifice activities, not I suspect because the service is better, as it isn't; but because the amount of varied packages available to employees will create an administrative demand the University is not prepared to meet. The range of potential opportunities for libraries is great, the time necessary to investigate, initiate, and manage these opportunities is also. Many libraries have flirted with the idea, but there appear to be few marriages to date.

Not only are barriers between industries breaking down, so have the barriers created by distance. Globalization is affecting the higher education industry as many of our institutions scour the globe for new markets. And where the university delivers, so too does the library, in all time zones.

The rapid entry of newcomers into old markets can be seen in the library world by two current developments: Net.library and Questia. At a recent demonstration of Net.library in Brisbane we were told that it aims to provide a single, flexible ordering and service entity with enhanced reporting capabilities including extranet usage statistics. Net.library's 325 employees include professional librarians and people from the publications industry. The strategic investors behind Net.library include Houghton Mifflin, EBSCO, OCLC, McGraw-Hill and Blackwells. They consider themselves a *content* provider who will distribute electronic books to libraries. The beauty of the service is that it mimics traditional library operations and uses Collection Manager as an ordering system. This makes it easy to relate to Net.library. When queried about individual clients, the demonstrator said that the original model allowed for them, but they now focus on libraries because, "no one wants to build up large electronic libraries." A statement open to question, particularly when a quick look at the Net.library web site did not give the impression they would turn away an individual interested in joining. It may be that the going rate of 150% to 'buy' a book will deter prospective clients, but those who can afford the price can take their library with them as long as they can access the Internet.

In contrast to Net.library, Questia is aiming directly at the end consumer. Here is a sample of what they promise:

- an entire collection searchable by a word, phrase, or concept so you can instantly find the most relevant paragraph
- a full selection of credible, high-quality books and journals
- simultaneous access by an unlimited number of people to a given book at any given time
- the ability to view, copy and past text from any page of a book
- tools that allow you to compose and save papers online
- footnotes and bibliographies that are hyperlinked across books and journals
- a state of the art Customer Service Center, accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Questia's goal is to offer a complete research service and their target market is university students and scholars who will be charged an 'affordable' subscription fee to gain access to an online database of 250,000 books. Even more interesting: "Questia has developed a way for publishers to receive revenue each time a student accesses even a single page of a book or journal. This has never been possible before. Thus, older titles and out-of-print books that may have been perused thousands of times in libraries and have not generated any new income will produce new revenues and once again become valuable assets for publishers." "This is a win/win situation for publishers." Seventy publishers are said to have given the nod to the system.

The Questia model is not unlike that of Net.library, except that Questia is not selling site licenses to libraries and is also paying publishers by the page view. Whether Questia will be able to deliver on their promise and how successful their service will be remains to be seen; but, as proposed, it is a classic example of eliminating the Library middleman by being a new player in an old market. It is also a good example of value added service. In fact, when developing the service, Questia must have asked, "What do researchers and students do?" and "How do they do it?" as opposed to "What information do they need."

The final corporate trend identified by Baldock is customization. We are moving from standard products to customized products for niche markets. When Levi Strauss will manufacture a tailor made pair of jeans to your personal specifications and BMW allows buyers to extensively determine their car configuration, we have come almost full circle back to a quasi-cottage industry, as information and communications technology allow individual objects to be created in factories designed for mass production. As a side issue, individually crafted jeans or cars create a relationship between the buyer and the supplier that purchasing off the shelf packages does not. As librarians, we are well aware that we have a mixture of clients to serve, and the electronic approach allows us to start tailoring services to meet those needs. There has already been a paper at this conference on a pilot study by University of Queensland Library's Customised Information Services Group. It is clear that while electronic systems can be used to standardize services, they can also be used to make them flexible and relevant.

Getting Closer to the Client

How do libraries get closer to clients at a time when clients are getting more remote? The standard answer is to know more about your customers. User surveys, focus groups, and other activities to determine client needs are now a standard in libraries. In 1998, the QUT Division of Information and Academic Services conducted a survey of undergraduate students perceptions and expectations of certain services that were either currently offered or which should have been offered by the Division.

Findings indicated that undergraduates have three key needs addressed by the Division:

1. consistent experience of supportive face-to-face and virtual relationships
2. becoming informed and competent learners
3. easy and timely access to quality resources and services.

Supportive face-to-face relationships that position the student as client were particularly important in the context of the University Library and the Student Computing Helpdesk. Students argued that such relationships develop their confidence and competence in the University setting.

Students expected the Division to ensure adequate and flexible staffing practices to enable quality service from staff. As an aside, it has not been unusual for students when commenting on quality of service from the Library to make the observation that the service is good but that the library needs more staff.

The report went on to say that managing virtual relationships was becoming an increasingly important skill for students.

And the capacity to access expanding knowledge bases was highly valued.

Students appreciated being able to access services and resources from any place at any time. The QUT data warehouse was given exceptional praise for making centralised and relevant information available in a user-friendly manner.

Most importantly, students expected that *initiatives promoting flexibility, efficiency and convenience will be a feature of future developments in the Division.*

They appreciated initiatives that support a shift from client service to *self-service*. However, with this they also expected the Division to maintain the capacity for personal relationships with students as an essential complement to the self-service directive. In fact, in every focus group conducted, student relationships with staff were given the greatest emphasis.

Gratifyingly, "The University Library was recognized to be the gateway to their success as students."

Investigate Client *Behaviour*

An area that has received less attention is investigation into client behaviour. Organisations conducting their business via e-commerce are now using data mining techniques to match up demographics and client needs and they are also tracking and examining electronic transactions. Libraries could do this too, particularly with reference services, or to detect patterns and trends in collection usage, but they appear to not be taking up these opportunities, possibly because real data-mining requires more software applications, or, most probably, because someone somewhere has to then absorb and make sense out of the data collected. It is far easier to collect process data or ask clients their opinions than to uncover behaviours and trends through extensive analysis. It may be time to add new tools to the kit.

Client Centred Design

We achieve client centred services through client assisted design. Personally, I have never considered libraries to be client friendly organizations. Library *staff* are friendly, but the systems have been cumbersome and complex to use, particularly as completion of a process might involve several steps in several locations culminating in matching up that mysterious entity, the call number, with an item on a shelf. Is it any wonder that today's users embrace electronic versions with alacrity, and probably with relief as well? Library conventions are transparent in the electronic world, and better still, the information can come to you. It is worthwhile noting that a system in which information comes to the client is many times more efficient than one where the client comes to the information. And this efficiency benefits both the client and the library. But to return to the point of client designed services, determining client need is not the same thing as designing the service to meet that need

How do we achieve client centred design? I cannot give you a blueprint, but I can identify some of the strategies for increasing the likelihood of useability:

- set up a cross functional project team. Do not simply hand a lending project to your lending staff. Include staff from other areas. This will give you insight on how the service might interact with other services.
- find a client(s) to sit on the group to give advice at the planning and testing stages
- armed with client needs and technology options, think creatively about possible solutions. Approach each service as if it were the first, in order to keep a fresh perspective.

- adopt an evolutionary approach: develop, test, refine, test, refine, then deliver.
- observe real clients using the service in real situations where possible.
- and, revisit and evaluate the useability of the service in action

Client Relationship Management

Finally, in addition to learning more about client behaviours and involving clients in service design, a current trend is on building long term client relationships, referred to as customer relationship management (CRM). CRM means segmenting customers and tailoring services to create value. Our clients really don't care how libraries store information, or that data from different sources must be combined to give them what they want, they don't even care if they call the wrong location. What they do know is that they want good service and they want it now. In industry, with increased competition, globalization, the growing cost of customer acquisition, and high customer turnover, CRM is viewed as critical to survival. It is one of the reasons for loyalty programs like frequent flyers or fly buys. CRM seeks to understand: who are the clients, what do they do, and what do they like. CRM is defined as an integrated marketing and service strategy that depends on coordinated actions. Universities have a long history of building relationships with graduates, businesses, and other sectors of the community where mutual benefit can be identified. Libraries have not operated on this level but the concept of managing client relationships goes beyond client service. I found this quote from *e-Business Roadmap for Success* interesting:

> *"Most companies consider themselves customer focused, but in reality, they're product-centric. Meanwhile, e-commerce has increased customer expectations, and customer expectations have raised the bar on service levels." (p. 109)*

Strategic Planning for the Virtual Library

Virtual libraries need strategic planning as much as hard copy libraries. Successful models for e-libraries will be unified and user-centric. They will focus on clients, marketing, and competitive positioning as much as on internal operations. We are already familiar with the planning processes of tracking changing environments, understanding user needs, and formulating strategies and implementation plans to meet those needs. This whole exercise also needs to be done from the electronic perspective.

Conclusion

Now is not an easy time. Given today's society, where speed and convenience are becoming paramount to our virtual communities, ours is the task of implementing top quality client service that is consistent with our users' experience in the rest of their lives. We cannot view our systems and practices in isolation.

What are some of the strategies for successful transition to electronic mode?

1. **Educate, train, and promote** to managers and staff as well as clients and partners. We need to educate in terms of what we are trying to accomplish as well as introduce changing services in order to promote acceptance. A good virtual library will never be achieved without top management support. Nor will it come into being without staff commitment. The cultural change supporting the transition is as important as developing a sound infrastructure.

2. **Review current distribution channels** to determine the potential effect that electronic operations will have. Determine the relationship of electronic services to traditional, and be clear about the anticipated configuration of both.

3. **Understand what clients expect from the Web** and how many are able and willing to interface with the library over electronic networks and to conduct transactions with the library in this way. The goal is a user-friendly web interface.

4. **Re-evaluate the nature of library services** to determine if there are other, better, or customized

services which could be offered. Effective and continuous monitoring of the environment is necessary to support new service development. Look for services that are good or better in electronic mode.

5. **Adopt client centred service design** using inclusive teams and extensive testing and review.

6. **Give new roles to staff** to support a cross-functional focus and total integration with overall library strategy, other library systems, and university and external systems.

7. **Extend current business to the outside** by linking with other online catalogues, information literacy programs, Internet addresses, etc. to expand electronic activities and help to shift your client interactions to electronic mode. The idea here is to develop a critical mass of interactions.

8. **Develop a Web-centric marketing strategy** clearly targeting the Web as a primary marketing channel. The Internet needs to be a major medium for all marketing communications activities including press releases and actual campaigns to take advantage of digital interactive marketing.

9. **Instil electronic management style** by moving decision making from physical to electronic space. Most libraries now operate in two spaces, the traditional physical one, and the developing electronic one, mediated by the Internet. Libraries need to manage in both spaces.
10. **Develop a good technical infrastructure** with a sound knowledge base supporting it.

11. **Provide a secure, well-controlled system.**

12. **Provide adequate resources.**

As I finish, let me tell you a short story. My car needed some repairs, and as it is a company car I needed to go through the relevant processes. As this is not an unusual situation for me, I had learned the various procedures for managing a car repair in the QUT environment, but now it is outsourced, and I was directed to a web page. I didn't feel confident with the information available, so I called the person listed as the contact. I explained my problem and the conversation then went like this:

the contact: *"We have a web page."*
me (brightly): *"Yes I know, that's where I found your name and number."*
the contact (irately): *"But you are not supposed to call me."*
me (annoyed): *"Look, I have 3 short questions. Could you please answer them?"*
the contact (impatiently): *"I really am too busy to be talking to people, You are supposed to read the Web page"*
me (enraged): *"And I am really too busy to read your Web page. Could you answer my questions?"*

And so it went. The irony is that their web page was not that bad, but their service was terrible.

My penultimate point is that an organization should, at all costs, avoid the tendency to believe that once an automated service is established the job is done. A library should never rely solely on electronic services without backing them up with people who can handle a query or problem. And my final point is, never allow a staff member to back up an electronic service without ensuring they live and breath polite, courteous, high quality client service.

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Back to Contents

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